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Protests in Chile

Marching on

The discontents of a healthy democracy

Jun 23rd 2011 | SANTIAGO | From the print edition

YOU can hardly walk down Santiago's main thoroughfare, the Alameda, these days without coming across someone with a protest banner and a grievance. Last month some 30,000 people marched against the government's decision to approve the building of a giant hydroelectric plant in pristine Patagonia. On June 16th 80,000 students, teachers and sympathisers demanded more money for state education in what was reported to be the biggest protest march since the mid-1980s, when Chileans braved General Pinochet's water cannon to demand a return to democracy. Subcontracted workers from a big copper mine, El Teniente, and farmers have also taken to the capital's streets.

This surly mood was reflected in an opinion poll taken last month by Adimark, which showed approval of the president, Sebastián Piñera, down to 36%, from 63% last October when he basked in the successful rescue of 33 miners in the Atacama Desert. His disapproval rating of 56% is now the highest of any president since the return to democracy in 1990. He and his ministers are engaged in "deep self-criticism," Mr Piñera responded.

The unpopularity of the centre-right government is partly Mr Piñera's own fault. Before becoming president, he was a successful businessman. He is an impetuous, headstrong workaholic, who is reluctant to delegate. As a result, he has become a lightning rod for all criticism of the government. His coalition partner, the Independent Democratic Union, the larger and more conservative of the two governing parties, is growing restless.

The protests have gone beyond predictable leftist agitation. The government seems surprised by the breadth of opposition to the proposed HidroAysén electricity scheme. The plan involves building five dams on two Patagonian rivers, flooding 5,900 hectares (14,600 acres) of nature reserves. Chile, with little oil and gas, faces an energy shortage, especially if the economy continues to grow by 6% a year. Officials point out that opponents of the dams have failed to propose a feasible alternative. But many Chileans worry at the threat to part of their

country's raw beauty. Some say Mr Piñera gives more weight to the concerns of business than of the environment, and that he should have organised a national debate on energy policy before pushing ahead with HidroAysén.

But Mr Piñera has no reason to despair. At an equivalent stage in her presidency, his predecessor, Michelle Bachelet, was similarly unpopular. When she left office three years later she had an approval rating of 84%. And respondents in the Adimark poll disliked the opposition, the centre-left Concertación coalition, which ruled for two decades until last year, even more than the government.

Some commentators think the protests express a widespread sense that after two decades of democracy and steady economic growth, Chile remains a very unequal country. Some would like to change the electoral system bequeathed by General Pinochet, under which the two main coalitions are guaranteed almost all the seats in Congress. But since that is in neither side's interest, it would take many more marchers to achieve that. Perhaps the main lesson of the protests is that after a long convalescence from the trauma of political strife and dictatorship, Chile is becoming a normal country.

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